The Three Schools of CCO Thinking: Interactive Dialogue and Systematic Comparison

Schoeneborn, Dennis ; Blaschke, Steffen ; Cooren, François ; Taylor, James R ; Seidl, David ; McPhee, Robert D

Abstract: The idea of the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) has gained considerable attention in organizational communication studies. This rather heterogeneous theoretical endeavor is driven by three main schools of thought: the Montreal School of Organizational Communication, the Four-Flows Model (based on Giddens's Structuration Theory), and Luhmann's Theory of Social Systems. In this article, we let proponents of all three schools directly speak to each other in form of an interactive dialogue that is structured around guiding questions addressing the epistemological, ontological, and methodological dimension of CCO as a theoretical paradigm. Based on this dialogue, we systematically compare the three schools of CCO thinking and identify common grounds as well as key differences.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318914527000

Management Communication Quarterly
2014, Vol. 28(2) 285–316

DOI: 10.1177/0893318914527000
mcq.sagepub.com
SAGE

The Three Schools of CCO Thinking: Interactive Dialogue and Systematic Comparison

Dennis Schoeneborn[1] and Steffen Blaschke[1,2], with special contributions from François Cooren[3], Robert D. McPhee[4], David Seidl[5], and James R. Taylor[3]

Abstract

The idea of the *communicative constitution of organizations* (CCO) has gained considerable attention in organizational communication studies. This rather heterogeneous theoretical endeavor is driven by three main schools of thought: the Montreal School of Organizational Communication, the Four-Flows Model (based on Giddens's Structuration Theory), and Luhmann's Theory of Social Systems. In this article, we let proponents of all three schools directly speak to each other in form of an interactive dialogue that is structured around guiding questions addressing the epistemological, ontological, and methodological dimension of CCO as a theoretical paradigm. Based on this dialogue, we systematically compare the three schools of CCO thinking and identify common grounds as well as key differences.

Keywords

communication as constitutive of organizations, organizational communication, organization theory, paradigms

[1]Copenhagen Business School, Frederiksberg, Denmark
[2]University of Hamburg, Germany
[3]University of Montreal, Quebec, Canada
[4]Arizona State University, Phoenix, USA
[5]University of Zurich, Switzerland

Corresponding Author:
Dennis Schoeneborn, Department of Intercultural Communication and Management, Copenhagen Business School, Porcelænshaven 18A, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark.
Email: dsc.ikl@cbs.dk

Forum Introduction by the Editor

The forum in this issue, guest edited by Dennis Schoeneborn and Steffen Blaschke, is organized to expound the conception of communicative constitution of organizations (CCOs) in different schools of thought. Scholars working on base of different theory traditions participate in the discussion. The dialogue unfolds as contributors compare notes on fundamentals, including their approaches to and positions on theoretical, methodological, and related philosophical issues that identify their theories as belonging to a community of practice whereas respective scholarships maintain somewhat distinctive views and stances.

The Three Schools of CCO Thinking

The idea of the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) has gained considerable attention in organizational communication studies (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud, & Taylor, 2014; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). The proponents of this theoretical perspective are unified by the idea that organizations are invoked and maintained in and through communicative practices (Cooren et al., 2011). It follows that if organizations are understood first and foremost as communicative phenomena, insights from communication studies are likely to advance the study of organizations (Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996). In that respect, the CCO perspective has paved the way for the increasing incorporation of insights from communication studies into the neighboring field of organization studies (see Kuhn, 2012).

Overall, the CCO perspective is a rather heterogeneous theoretical endeavor, although its main proponents subscribe to the basic theoretical premise that reality is communicatively constituted (Cooren, 2012; Craig, 1999), which extends to organizations as well (Luhmann, 2000; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Brummans et al. (2014) identify three main "schools" of current CCO thinking: first, the *Montreal School* of Organizational Communication (e.g., Cooren, Taylor, & Van Every, 2006; Taylor & Van Every, 2000); second, the *Four-Flows Model* (McPhee & Zaug, 2000), which is based on Giddens's Structuration Theory, and third, Luhmann's *Theory of Social Systems* (e.g., Luhmann, 2003; Seidl & Becker, 2005). Although Ashcraft et al. (2009) list many further works as representative of an "implicit" CCO perspective (e.g., Deetz, 2005; Monge & Contractor, 2003), in this article, we concentrate on these three schools as the main representatives of what the same authors call the "explicit" CCO view.

Although the three schools share certain baseline assumptions (e.g., on the formative character of language use), they sharply diverge in other respects (e.g., on the issues of suitable empirical methodologies and the role of human and non-human actors in the CCOs). Presumably also due to its early-stage character as a theoretical paradigm, the CCO perspective has been criticized for making too bold ontological claims without differentiating sufficiently between the kinds of communication that bring forth organization (e.g., Bisel, 2010) and for offering only vague answers to the question of what distinguishes organizations from other social entities, such as movements or communities (Sillince, 2010). In response to these criticisms, we believe that it is necessary to engage in further theoretical work at the intersections of the three main schools of CCO thinking (Brummans et al., 2014). With the aim of demarcating the common ground on which a unified CCO perspective can be built, this article provides a systematic comparison of the three schools. A first important step in this direction was taken recently by Kuhn (2012) who has highlighted the three CCO schools' potential to bridge micro–macro gaps through the communication-centered study of organizations. Our systematic comparison aims to further develop these efforts in the form of an interactive, dynamic dialogue about the three schools of CCO thinking (in its format resembling the recent *MCQ* article by Koschmann et al., 2012).

The starting point of this article is a historical event: In March 2012, we had the honor of hosting a small conference at the University of Hamburg, Germany that brought together (most likely for the first time) some of the main representatives of all three schools of CCO thinking. Specifically, the panel discussion involved François Cooren (representing the Montreal School), Robert D. McPhee (representing the Four-Flows Model), and David Seidl (representing Luhmann's Theory of Social Systems), as well as Dennis Schoeneborn (as a moderator). The panel discussion highlighted various similarities and differences among the three strands of CCO thinking. As a "chronicle" of this event, our article conveys the essence of the vivid panel discussion and provides organizational communication scholars with a systematic theoretical grounding for further inquiries into the CCOs.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, we have reconstructed an interactive dialogue among the panelists from the Hamburg workshop (François Cooren, Robert D. McPhee, and David Seidl). Their dialogue is structured around guiding questions that address the epistemological, ontological, and methodological dimensions of CCO as a theoretical paradigm. Second, on the basis of this dialogue and to provide a systematic comparison of the three schools, we (Dennis Schoeneborn and Steffen Blaschke) discuss the key similarities and differences between them. Our article concludes with an afterword by James R. Taylor in which he reflects on the challenges that

the theoretical integration of the three schools presents, as well as on opportunities for further paradigmatic, theoretical, and empirical inquiries into the constitutive character of communication for organizations.

The Three Schools in Dialogue

In the following, we reproduce the main questions and arguments from the Hamburg panel on the three schools of CCO thinking. Dennis Schoeneborn moderated the discussion and posed the guiding questions (*in italics*) to our three panelists: François Cooren as representative of Montreal School, David Seidl as representative of Luhmann's Theory of Social Systems, and Robert D. McPhee as representative of the Four-Flows Model along the lines of Giddens's ST.

1. *How would you describe the epistemology that underlies the school you are representing?*

François Cooren: The epistemology that underlies the Montreal School's work could be broadly defined as a relational one. By "relational epistemology," I mean the kind of epistemology that was put forward by pragmatist scholars such as Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey and, to a lesser extent, William James. A relational or pragmatist epistemology calls into question both subjectivism and idealism, on one hand, and empiricism and materialism, on the other, by refusing to determine a starting point in the act of knowing, inquiring, or investigating. Investigating something—whether that is human interaction, atomic particles, or biological organisms—consists of engaging with or getting in contact with these objects, *which act on us as much as we act on them*. This type of epistemology is globally compatible with Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005, 2013) and Alfred North Whitehead's Process Philosophy (Whitehead, 1920, 1929).

David Seidl: Although Luhmann (1995) shares the processual understanding of social reality with the Montreal School, he differs markedly in his epistemological position that can be described as a form of "radical constructivism" (Luhmann, 2009; Watzlawick, 1984). In contrast to the Montreal School that refuses "to determine a starting point in the act of knowing, inquiring, or investigating," there is a clear "starting point" in Luhmann's theory: the observer—a human being, a social system (e.g., an organization), or even a machine—and the observations (see Seidl & Becker, 2006). Depending on what distinctions the observer uses, he, she, or it will "construct" the world differently. The distinction between system and environment is central to Luhmann's theory of social systems. This distinction

underlies all his statements about the social world and guides the choice of other observational distinctions. Luhmann explicitly acknowledges that the choice of observational distinctions is inherently contingent and that there are no external criteria for justifying the selection of one distinction over the other. Thus, a description of the world cannot be said to be truer or less true than others but only more "viable" or less "viable"—that is, it works better than others or not quite as well as others. At the same time, Luhmann does not deny the actual existence of the external world (i.e., "brute facts" as understood by Searle, 1995). On the contrary, it is the external world that determines which constructions of reality work and which do not.

Robert D. McPhee: My school is, I suppose, structuration theory (ST)—though my version has tenets and interpretations that Anthony Giddens, the originator of the theory, might well not accept—and, more narrowly, the Four-Flows Model of the CCOs. For ST, the key epistemological (and paradoxical) tenet is probably that epistemology is governed by (social) ontology—we must know what knowledge is, before deciding how knowledge is gained. The second tenet is that knowledge is overwhelmingly an outcome of institutional reflexivity—we gain and certify knowledge mainly through a network of institutions that focus on research, as well as through other types of institutions. The third tenet is about agent knowledgeability: People, as capable agents, have practical knowledge of their surroundings that is certified by the fact that it works, and such knowledge is the basis for the emergence of other knowledge and of interpretive resources as well as the communication flows that constitute organization. We must remember that ST—like, I would claim, social systems theory and the Montreal's dialectic between text and conversation—is mainly a meta-theory, guiding theorization and methodology without, typically, constituting an explanatory theory. Thus, it could guide inquiry into *multiple* theories about, for instance, the importance of narrative and identification in CCO thinking, or about the constitution of formal hierarchies (McPhee, 1988).

2. *How does each school define communication?*

François Cooren: Although there is not necessarily a consensus on this question among the representatives of our school, we could say that communication is, first and foremost, considered an action. Taylor and Van Every (2000) also insist on the *transactional* dimension of communication that implies an asymmetry in the act of communicating that creates a sense of obligation, debt, or expectation on the part of the persons who are involved in an exchange. All representatives of the Montreal School would, I think, also agree that communication implies not only an agent and a recipient but also

that an agent is always acting on behalf of, in the name of, or for someone or something else (that is, a principal). This idea of an "authorized agent" parallels the notion of *thirdness*, as put forward by Charles Sanders Peirce, but also Garfinkel's idea of accountability. It is also implicit in the "ventriloquist thesis" that I promote (Cooren, 2010, 2012). This means that communication should not be considered an activity that only concerns human beings. Many other things get communicated through what people say, write, or do: emotions, ideas, beliefs, values, positions, but also—and through the latter of these—situations, facts, realities, and so on. This way of conceiving of communication is perfectly compatible with the relational thesis, as outlined above.

David Seidl: For Luhmann, communication is a particular form of observation (for a detailed description, see Seidl & Mormann, in press): It is the form of observation used by social systems. Building on the speech theories of Karl Bühler (1934), Luhmann (1995) conceptualizes communication as a synthesis of three components: information, utterance, and understanding. These three components *together* constitute the individual unit of communication. Luhmann uses the term *information* to refer to the "what" of a communication. *Utterance* concerns the "how"—that is, the means by which communication is conducted (e.g., the specific words or tone that are used)—and the "why"—that is, what motivates a communication. Finally, *understanding* refers to the distinction between information and utterance. One has to be able to distinguish the utterance from the information; *what* is communicated must be distinguished from *how* and *why* it is communicated. This third component of a communication has a pivotal role because it determines the meaning of the communication; that is to say, what is important here is not the intended meaning of the communication but how the communication is understood. As Luhmann (1995) writes, communication is made possible retrospectively, which is "contrary to the temporal course of the process" (p. 143). Thus, in contrast to the Montreal School and also to the Four-Flows Model, communication is not conceptualized as a kind of action. The concept of action would only cover utterance and information but not understanding (Luhmann, 1986). It is important to note that Luhmann considers communication a purely social phenomenon. In this sense, communication has to be conceptualized as an emergent phenomenon that arises from the *interaction* between individuals. Extending this line of reasoning, Luhmann argues that what matters is not how a particular individual understands a communication but how a subsequent communication interprets the preceding communication it is connected to; only a communicative event can determine the particular way in which the immediately preceding communicative event is understood. For example, from a given answer, you can infer how

the respective question has been understood. It follows that the meaning of communication is never fixed but shifts with every further communication. It is this indeterminacy of the meaning of each instance of communication that leads to a continuous production of communication.

Robert D. McPhee: Both these positions fit nicely with the structurational emphasis on interaction as the active mutual orientation to others in a given context (although the idea of context essentially goes beyond any finite system of operations or imbricated units). However, ST also valuably identifies the necessary substantive features of communication, arguing that communication is best understood as a process of *symbolic transtruction*, where "transtruction" means the intermediation of each of four basic dimensions of action—signification, domination, legitimation, and constitution (see McPhee, 1998)—by the other three dimensions. In other words, communication is the fused emergence, in symbolic interaction, of meaning—in the first instance, as we are talking about communication—power, and its bases: normative force, and socially or materially constituted systems and contexts. It is important to preserve the interpretive emphasis on tacit skill and interaction as achievement, and to avoid the temptations of ideas such as "deep structure" and "cognitive schema" as "tools of thought without . . . cognitive energy" (Heracleous & Hendry, 2000, p. 1270), which succumb to the agentless functionalism that Giddens decried; nevertheless, I think all four dimensions are still useful in that they elaborate the complexity that communication involves.

3. *What particular kind of communication constitutes organization? And how does each school define organization?*

François Cooren: Regarding the first question, it all depends on what we mean by "organization." If we mean organiz*ing*, then some forms of communication are more directly related to the act of organizing than others. Directives and commissives, in the Searlean (1979) typology of speech acts, are directly concerned with organizing, because they are, as I said further above, what create these effects of submission, imbrication, or embeddedness. However, if we now consider organizations per se (i.e., as social entities), any act of communication can reconstitute for "another next first time" (Garfinkel, 2002, p. 182) what an organization is or does. By claiming that his or her organization should not be deemed entirely responsible for an ecological disaster (assertive speech act), a spokesperson constitutes that organization as not entirely liable in this incident (whether or not this claim will be accepted is another story, of course. This has to be negotiated through communication). By naming or hiring a manager (declarative speech act), a

human resources director will redefine the direction of a department and consequently reconstitute an aspect of his or her organization, and so on. Some speech acts certainly are more consequential than others—depending on who produces them or what matters they deal with—but they all consist of reproducing or transforming for "another next first time" the organization.

As for the second question, the Montreal School does not hesitate to speak of both "organization" and "organizing" to emphasize both the entity-like and the processual dimension of the phenomenon. Regarding the phenomenon of organizing, this school's representatives tend to associate it with the transactional dimension of communication. Because of the debt or obligation created by any act of communication, a response is expected, which creates an effect of hierarchy in the contributions. Some contributions are subsumed under or embedded within others. For instance, let us imagine a situation where X asks Y something. Responding to X's question or request implies that Y decides to answer—or not—X's question or comply or not with X's request. This response consequently implies that X *reacts* to what Y answered or did *for* him or her (by thanking or sanctioning Y). As we see in this minisequence, communication creates organizing to the extent that a sequence of actions—what Y does for X—is *subsumed under* and even *embedded within* another sequence of action (X asking Y something and X thanking or sanctioning Y for what he or she did or said). Proponents of the Montreal School argue that these effects of submission, imbrications, and embeddedness constitute the essence of organizing (e.g., Taylor & Van Every, 2011).

Regarding the question of what defines an organization, the Montreal School insists on the necessity to identify in some cases (not all) *in the name of what collective* a series of activities is ultimately done. As James R. Taylor often reminds us, the organization needs to look as if it is speaking with one voice or acting in unison at some point; otherwise, the term "organization" loses its significance. Founding an organization amounts to creating a *personne morale* in the name of which some people will be allowed or authorized to speak and act—whether these persons are owners, managers, or employees (Taylor & Van Every, in press). More generally, an organization is embodied or incarnated, or materializes, in anything or anyone that can be recognized as representing it, that is, making it present, whether a spokesperson (who speaks on its behalf), a logo (that marks its presence), an employee (who works for it), a text (that spells out its policies), a product (that represents its style, qualities, or character), or a building (that encompasses most of its activities). An organization is therefore hybrid: It is made of various ontologies that are organized and recognized to a greater or lesser extent. Taylor and Van Every (2000) would also say that it is an interrelated network

of communication processes, a position that appears, to some extent, compatible with social systems theory.

David Seidl: In contrast to the Montreal School, but in line with the Four-Flows Model, Luhmann uses the term *organization* in a narrower, institutional sense. For Luhmann (2003), organizations are one of three generic types of social systems; the other two being society (i.e., the system encompassing all communication) and face-to-face interactions (i.e., the system encompassing communication between people who reflexively perceive each other as present). All three types of social systems are conceptualized as "autopoietic" (i.e., self-reproducing) communication systems that are able to process meaning. They both consist of communication *and* reproduce their communication through the very communication they consist of (Luhmann, 2005). What distinguishes organizations from other systems is their particular form of decision communication (or "decisions" in short). This does not mean that there are no other forms of communication "in" organizations (e.g., gossip), but these forms of communication do not contribute to the autopoietic reproduction of the organization (Luhmann, 2000). Decisions are special in that they are "compact communications" (Luhmann, 2000, p. 185) that communicate their own contingency. They explicitly communicate that they are selections that might have been different, that there are alternatives to each selection. Decisions link up to form sequences, where each decision serves as a decision premise for following decisions. Accordingly, the organization is nothing but a network of interrelated processes of decisions connecting to other decisions (Blaschke, Schoeneborn, & Seidl, 2012).

Luhmann (2005) emphasizes that decisions are extremely powerful forms of communication because they permit the absorption of uncertainty: Every decision takes "responsibility" for the risks associated with the selection of one alternative over all other possible alternatives. If a decision is accepted, it absorbs all the uncertainty that was involved in the decision-making process. Ensuing decisions can take the selected alternative as a clear point of reference and ignore all the uncertainty that was involved in the original decision. The capacity of decisions to absorb uncertainty allows organizations to fulfill highly complex tasks that would not be possible otherwise.

Luhmann furthermore stresses two important characteristics of organizations that result from the specific form that their communicative reproduction takes: First, in contrast to face-to-face interaction systems, but in common with the societal system, organizations have the ability to produce self-descriptions—for example, in the form of a mission statement—which can provide an orientation to organizational communication (Seidl, 2005)—something that is also stressed by the Montreal School. Second, in contrast to both society and face-to-face interaction systems, organizations have the

ability to communicate with other systems in their environment, as they can authorize (i.e., decide on) spokespersons to communicate "on behalf of" the organization. Accordingly, it is possible to attribute communication to the organization (Luhmann, 2000). For example, a CEO can speak to members of other organizations representing his or her organization. This echoes some of the assumptions of the Montreal School and the emphasis they place on the possibilities of speaking "on behalf of" the organization (Cooren, 2010).

Robert D. McPhee: I would accept, tentatively, Giddens's (1984) definition of organizations as "collectivities in which the reflexive regulation of the conditions of system reproduction looms large in the continuity of day-to-day practices" (p. 200). Central here is the flow of reflexive self-structuring, for example, the processes of creating a broadly known membership boundary and determining its permeability, and of gathering information about and purposefully designing the relations among members. However, the Four-Flows Model (McPhee & Iverson, 2009; McPhee & Zaug, 2000) also notes assemblages of communication processes that may contribute to "flows" of (a) membership negotiation, including especially processes that relate individuals to organizations as identifiable systems—such as role learning, power accumulation, identification, and disidentification; (b) activity coordination, that is, especially, processes of immediate, contextualized mutual adjustment to the activities of others in ways not totally guided by (c) reflexive self-structuring (described just above); and (d) institutional positioning, that is, especially, processes of individual communication that generate relations between any specified organization and its array of competitors, regulators, and so on, and the more extensive institutional system—for example, capitalism.

Importantly, flows may constitute organizations as flawed or disintegrating; and they can and nearly always do overlap. The Four-Flows distinctions seem, as we hope, to valuably cut across meta-theories—they could be, for instance, four dimensions of imbrications or actant-relations exhibiting ventriloquism in varied ways. And the flows have a tone similar to that of Luhmann's "function systems," with Parsons' theorizing as a common ancestor. In addition, similar to Luhmann, for ST scholars, organizations are systems with boundaries. Organizations can be seen as attaining—communicatively—"a level of effective integration that allows a set of people engaged in social practices to be realistically identifiable as an organization" (McPhee & Iverson, 2009, p. 62).

4. *How do local interactions "scale up" to form organizations (i.e., how are the micro-and meso-levels linked)?*

François Cooren: My position, which follows Latour's, is that the notion of "level" is somewhat misleading. It is part of our vocabulary, so it means that it is useful to speak about various levels of discussions, activities, or even realities. For instance, we speak about "the level of the upper management's world" versus "the level of the shop floor." However, even if these different levels do exist, they are all produced, maintained, and cultivated by interactions and transactions. Upper managers talk to and work with each other as much as workers talk to and work with each other to get things done. They form different communities of practice that represent different values, concerns, norms, and so on. The effects of hierarchy and levels, which are real, come from the transactional character of communication, which I already alluded to. Some activities are embedded, imbricated within, or subsumed under others. When an organization speaks, it is usually through an authorized spokesperson who speaks on its behalf. It can also be through a press release or a website. When an organization acts, it can be through the contribution of an employee who is authorized to work in its name. As we see, there is a change of level, but the rubber needs to hit the road somewhere, which means that we cannot ever leave, by definition, the terra firma of interaction. "Scaling up" is therefore something that actors themselves do. In the same conversation, someone can start speaking as an individual and then end his or her turn of talk by positioning himself or herself as speaking as a CEO. It is this kind of "scaling up" or "scaling down" that we find so interesting.

David Seidl: Luhmann would agree that levels do not exist by themselves but are the product of communication. Yet, Luhmann's notion of levels is probably more traditional than that of the Montreal School and more in line with Giddens's and the Four-Flows Model. Luhmann's (1986) organization theory addresses the link between the micro-level of individual units of communication and the meso-level of the organization as a system: Because the meaning of each communication is defined by another communication, each communication only exists as part of a larger network of interconnected communicative events. Every communication calls forth further communications and is itself the product of preceding communications. Furthermore, by distinguishing between the other communications to which it connects and those to which it does not connect, it reproduces the distinction between those elements that belong to the network and those that do not. In other words, communication reproduces the boundary of the system. For example, every single decision in an organization differentiates between other decisions that belong to the organization—and are therefore binding for the focal decision—and other decisions that belong to other social systems.

Robert D. McPhee: I worry that a tacit assumption behind the term *scale up* is that organization is a matter of scale—that we wind up with

organizations if we look at more, or more widespread, or more collective (denoted by "we"), or more connected or patterned networks of interaction. No; complex organizations must be constituted by multiple definite kinds of communication in multiple times and places, but that communication generatively structures ("distanciates") the relations among times and spaces in ways that constitute the organization. At this point, we must address the "composition problem" (Kuhn, 2012), of how "systems of relations and practices become constituted as organizations, despite (or perhaps through?) the distance in space and time, the conflict and anomie, and the diversity and fragmentation, that are characteristic of organizational systems" (McPhee & Iverson, 2009, p. 55), and equally, of how scattered instances of communication without sufficient linkage characteristics do *not* constitute organizations. In a recent article, Heather Canary and I (McPhee & Canary, 2013) argue that the phenomenon of "distanciation" is crucial to solving that problem, specifically by generating emergent patterns and boundaries that "count" as time and space, organizationally and societally.

5. *How do organizations and society interrelate (i.e., how are the meso- and macro-levels linked)?*

François Cooren: For me, organizations and society can only relate through their representatives, whether human or non-human. For instance, governments control the activities of organizations not only through specific laws and rules that dictate how companies should function and operate but also through, for example, comptrollers acting on the government's behalf and capable of enforcing these laws and rules. If we think of cultures as representative of specific collectives, we can also acknowledge and study how what is *cultivated*—habits, values, norms of conduct, and so on—comes to pervade the functioning of an organization.

David Seidl: In contrast to both the Montreal School and the Four-Flows Model, Luhmann (2012) has a specific conceptualization of society as the all-encompassing social system that contains all communication. Each and every communication is part of the society and, as such, reproduces it. This holds true also for organizational communications: Organizational communications reproduce both the organization and the society at large. Yet, these communications have different meanings in the context of each system, that is, they make a "different difference" to each system. In the context of the organization, they have a more specific meaning than they do in the context of the society at large. Organizational communication uses the various specific modes of communication that society holds in stock to produce specific decisions. Courts, for example, draw on communication codified in a legal

format to produce individual legal decisions and corporations draw largely on communication codified in a financial format to produce their business decisions. Although all communications of an organization are part of society, not all societal communications are also part of the organization; that is, there are also societal communications in the environment of the organization, such as communications by other organizations or non-organizational forms of communication (e.g., interactions). In this sense, we can say that society partly takes place inside and partly outside of the organization. This kind of communication that takes place outside the organization might cause "perturbations" within the organization; however, it cannot become part of the self-reproduction of the organization.

Luhmann (2012) argued that the emergence of organizations as a new type of social system was a precondition for the modern, functionally differentiated society. For example, organizations can compensate to some extent for the uncertainty and complexity that stem from the fact that society lacks a communicative center (Drepper, 2005). Although modern society is differentiated into functional subsystems (such as the economic system, the legal system, the scientific system, or the political system) with competing orientations, because organizations operate via decision communications, they have the capacity to provide clear directions to their internal communication processes. Importantly, organizations can provide a "substitute address" for communication directed to different functional subsystems of society that themselves do not have the ability to communicate in their own name. In other words, we find in most functional subsystems important organizations that we might address instead of the functional subsystem as such. For example, one cannot communicate with the economic system, legal system, or the political system, but one can communicate with trade associations, supreme courts, or states.

Robert D. McPhee: The Four-Flows Model emphasizes that any one organization exists in the context of high modernity (Giddens, 1990) and, thus, structurates a position in, notably, the changing institutional context of this era. Any such structuration rests on the activity of organizational members, who must "mangle out" the practical meaning of the environment, of the organization–environment link, and of the boundary between organization and environment. We must be careful to add that all four flows connect organization and "society" in varied ways.

6. *What is the role of materiality and non-human actors in the CCO?*

François Cooren: For me, materiality and non-human agency refer to two different things. Materiality comes from the Latin word *materia*, which

means "the substance from which something is made" or the "grounds, reason, or cause for something." When we speak of materiality, we thus implicitly refer to what *stands under something*, what might explain its mode of being or existence. In connection to the CCO, we see that the question of materiality would thus refer to *what* or even *who* stands under the organization, so to speak; that is, what makes the organization what it is: spokespersons, employees, managers, buildings, operations, logos, texts, and so on. All these things and persons act and communicate on behalf of the organization; they embody or materialize it, even if this embodiment or materialization is always negotiable communicatively.

Regarding the question of non-human agency, we see that, indeed, artifacts have a big role to play in the communicative constitution of an organization. They *matter* a lot. They *count*. They display agency to the extent that they "make a difference." They communicate how an organization is perceived and experienced—think of buildings, machines, and logos, for instance. They express their missions, official positions, and policies—think of texts and web sites. However, I have to say that I am always ambivalent about the term *non-human*, because a text, a machine, or a website is something that is, in many respects, extremely human. I prefer to simply name these things that participate in the mode of communicating of an organization a mission statement, a logo, a building, a policy, a directive, a memo, and so on. All these things are human *and* non-human. They actively participate in what stands under or supports any organization (which is also human and non-human).

David Seidl: In Luhmann's theory, material objects, in the conventional sense, are treated as part of the organization's environment. They are not part of the organization. This is an important distinction from the Montreal School, of course. According to Luhmann, material objects only become socially relevant to the extent that they affect communication. There are three ways in which they might do that. First, material objects might be *addressed* in the organizational communication, that is, the communication might be *about* material objects. Second, material objects might affect the communication in the form of "perturbations." For example, the impending departure of a train—the material object—might cause a "perturbation" in a face-to-face communication prompting the participants to say goodbye. Third, material objects might feature as part of the utterance. For example, in soccer, showing a red card is a means of conveying the information that a player is sent off the field. In contrast to material objects, "non-human actors" (although Luhmann would not have used this particular term) play an important role in Luhmann's organization theory when it comes to the organization itself (see Schoeneborn, 2011): Luhmann conceives of the organization as a system that

is capable of observation and communication—as are society and face-to-face interaction systems. In this sense, he attributes to the organization many qualities that are usually only associated with human beings.

Robert D. McPhee: Of course, non-human things, forces, and contexts are of huge significance in all of human life, including organizations, and many theories pay insufficient attention to them. One of the bases of my theorizing, contingency theory (e.g., Perrow, 1967), has put technology and its objects at the core of explanations of how organizations and communication are linked. Indeed, the interpretive revolution in our field (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983) was a move *away* from direct material effects, toward interpretive mediation. More directly, I think ST gives a significant and proper place to non-human "actors" while emphasizing the agentive powers of humans in communicative contexts. More broadly, phenomena referred to by the term "materiality" are discussed both in ST by means of concepts such as *practice, resources, constraints* (and thus *enablements*), and *conditions* that contextualize and existentially modify life (see McPhee & Iverson, 2011), as well as in correlative subtheories, such as "communities of practice" (Iverson & McPhee, 2008) and "activity systems" (Canary, 2010; Canary & McPhee, 2009). We argue that these terms retheorize "the material" in ways that are powerfully integrated with broad social scientific concerns. However, we must remember that rehabilitating "non-human elements" and recognizing systems that are not reducible to (unorganized bunches of) human agents are theoretic moves that do not demand the minimization of the difference between human agents (who alone can understand communications) and other elements and systems.

7. *What is the role of individual human actors in the CCO?*

François Cooren: This question gives me the opportunity to be very clear on the question of human agency. For me, the human actor is an *obligatory passage point* in everything I have been talking about so far. If a logo communicates something in the name of an organization, it is not only because its designers might have meant it that way (sometimes, they can miss the point) but also because someone is able to *make it say something* when he or she sees it. If a policy can have some bearing over what people do in an organization, it is because people *know what it says* or that other will *make it say something* in specific circumstances. The organizational world is, of course, a world where humans play a key role, to the extent that they are the ones who mobilize or "ventriloquize" texts, values, and facts in their discourse. What I want to point out is that humans are not only *ventriloquists*, in that they make, for instance, policies say something in specific circumstances but

also *ventriloquized*, in that these policies lead them to say specific things and not other things. There is no absolute starting point because we live in a relational world.

David Seidl: Luhmann's view of the role of human agency is quite distinct from that of the Montreal School and also from that of the Four-Flows Model, as it seems to me. To start with, this is evident in his conceptualization of the human being as a conglomerate that comprises organic systems (e.g., the nervous systems, immune system, etc.) and a psychic system (i.e., the human mind), which are distinct autopoietic systems. The psychic system (i.e., the mind) is the most important one with regard to social systems. It is a system that reproduces itself on the basis of thoughts, that is, analogously to the conceptualization of social systems, psychic systems are conceptualized as self-reproducing systems of thoughts. As separate autopoietic systems, psychic systems are located in the environment of the organization. Thus, they do not constitute part of the organization and cannot contribute to its autopoietic reproduction. Psychic systems and the organization are operatively closed in relation to each other: Psychic systems can only produce thoughts that produce further thoughts but they cannot produce communication (for a detailed description of the relation between social and psychic systems, see Luhmann, 2002). Similarly, organizations can only produce decisions that produce further decisions but they cannot produce thoughts. Nevertheless, although these systems are operatively closed, they can still influence each other by causing "perturbations" in each other. Although organizations reproduce themselves exclusively by communication, they depend on psychic systems for their reproduction. Luhmann (1995, 2002) refers to this relation between psychic and social systems as "interpenetration." For example, social systems depend on psychic systems for the perception of utterances—social systems themselves cannot hear, talk, or read texts. Furthermore, psychic systems can help the organization memorize communicative events beyond the momentary point of these events' occurrence. Social systems are (structurally) coupled to psychic systems in the sense that they can count on the communications to cause perturbations in the participating psychic systems and to receive perturbations from the psychic systems, in turn. In particular, they can expect psychic systems to trigger further communications after every communication. As Luhmann (2002) writes, "The mind cannot instruct communication, because communication constructs itself. But the mind is a constant source of impulses for the one or the other turn of the operative process inherent in communication" (pp. 176-177).

Robert D. McPhee: Individual human actors communicate, and they are the only beings that do so (in the fullest sense of the term), in part because they have the powers listed above. I am persuaded by Charles Taylor's

arguments about human agency being impossible for, machines for example. That being said, I think the phenomena that François Cooren refers to as "ventriloquism" can be compatible with and valuably inform ST. However, that is contingent on accepting that human agents' interpretive systems include resources that lead an individual to think of himself or herself as able to (fallaciously) speak for, or even to be, an organization. We must remind ourselves, as scholars, that such speech does not in itself, or even mainly, constitute an organization, and can be delusional or involve unusual registers in a number of theoretically interesting ways—and humans do draw on arrays of structural resources that have definite affinities to Luhmann's (1995) notion of communication systems.

8. *What methodologies are the most suitable to studying the CCO?*

François Cooren: One of the most promising methodologies is shadowing, in particular video-shadowing, which is something that very few researchers seem to mobilize, unfortunately—curiously, one of the most renowned management scholars, Henry Mintzberg, started his career by using this approach. I wish others had tried to follow in his steps! Why video-shadowing? Because it is the only way I know that allows me to access as faithfully as possible what happens on the terra firma of interaction. When you are following people and projects, the question of macro-, meso-, and micro-levels starts to lose its significance. When I record a meeting between an MSF (*Médecins Sans Frontières*) representative and a military officer in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, I not only observe Mr. X meeting Mr. Y but also notice how MSF and the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) speak to each other. Is it a micro-event or a macro-event? Both, of course, and this illustrates why "scaling up" is something that not only we, as analysts, but also actors more generally do. At some point, for instance, the MSF representative will switch from speaking on behalf of MSF to speaking on his or her own behalf; sometimes in the same turn of talk. It is these moments that I find so interesting, because these show how and why the detailed study of communication is so crucial to understanding the mode of being and functioning of our world.

David Seidl: The particular epistemological and ontological assumptions underlying Luhmann's approach to social systems have specific methodological implications that differ to some extent from those of the Montreal School and the Four-Flows Model. Epistemologically, Luhmann starts with the assumption that the outside world does exist but is unknown to us. All descriptions of the world are constructions of an observer, whether a social or psychic system (Luhmann, 2009). This also applies to all empirical descriptions of the

social world. There is no possibility of describing the social world as it is. Thus, when social researchers study organizations, the respective descriptions are merely constructions resulting from the specific observational distinctions applied. This, first of all, means that researchers should acknowledge and make explicit the specific observational distinctions that are applied in their empirical observations. Second, it implies that, rather than separating the empirical observations from the theory, one should use the conceptual distinctions provided by the theory for one's empirical observations (Besio & Pronzini, 2010). Otherwise, one ends up with empirical descriptions that are produced on the basis of different observational distinctions from those on which the theory is based, which is comparing apples and oranges. Ontologically, Luhmann starts with the assumption that the social world consists of communication. Consequently, empirical research needs to be directed at communication rather than at actors. There is a wide range of different methodological approaches that seem suitable for capturing the specificities of organizational communications, such as studying chains of decisions or examining semantics (for an overview, see Besio & Pronzini, 2010).

Robert D. McPhee: ST is quite catholic about methods, not least because of its epistemology. That being said, I think that interpretive or critical methods (including both discourse-focused and ethnographic methods) demonstrate structurational processes more easily than standard quantitative methods. That also being said, I think specific theories give much more direction in the choice of method than ST, which is a meta-theory. For instance, ST has shown the important applicability of (largely quantitative) interaction analysis for understanding the use of technology in decision making.

Systematic Comparison of the Three Schools

Using the above dialogue as a basis, we can delimit the common ground that the three schools of CCO thinking share. Furthermore, we highlight crucial differences among them. More specifically, in the following systematic comparison, we cover four main areas: (a) epistemology and ontology, (b) the notion of communication, (c) the relation between organization and communication, and (d) the question of human and non-human agency.

Epistemology and Ontology

All three schools of CCO thinking start off with the same premise: Communication is not just a peripheral epiphenomenon of human actions but the *primary mode of explaining* social reality (Craig, 1999). Cooren (2012), as one of the main representatives of the Montreal School, expresses this

basic premise when he refers to the "communicative constitution of reality." Essentially, he proposes that communication is

> more than an *explanandum*, that is, something that ought to be explained by our models or theories, but that it also be considered an *explanans*, that is, something that explains how our world is what it is and how it functions. (p. 2)

Luhmann (1995) similarly presumes that self-referential systems of communication essentially constitute social reality. Accordingly, understanding social reality requires studying how social systems unfold and evolve as communication processes, how they reproduce themselves, and how they establish self-referential boundaries between themselves and their environment, as well as other social systems. ST in the interpretation of McPhee and his colleagues simultaneously sees social reality as a construction of organizations and their members and as a confrontation to them that requires interpretation (McPhee & Zaug, 2001). Organizations and their members rely on communication to arrive at a mutually acceptable account of social reality and deal with its respective uncertainty.

Notwithstanding the focus on communication as an *explanans* across all three schools, the dialogue also reveals important epistemological and ontological differences that separate them. These differences mainly concern the question of whether the objective material reality is actually observable. At one end of the continuum, there is Luhmann's (1995) theory of social systems. Seidl highlights the self-referential closure of social systems with respect to their environment as the main implication of Luhmann's notion of *autopoiesis*. From that perspective, observations (including scientific inquiries) are exclusively an operation that organizations perform and are necessarily subject to proactive construction through communication. These ideas are rooted in a social constructivist stance and rest on the assumption that the distinction between a system and its environment is an essential precondition for observing reality. At the other end, there are the scholars of the Montreal School, who explicitly oppose more radical forms of constructivism and instead presuppose the existence and observability of an objective material reality, although its perception is always mediated by communication:

> Advocating a communicative constitution of reality does not amount to falling into some degenerate form of constructivism (or even solipsism). It means, on the contrary, that, for instance, preoccupations, realities, and situations get expressed and translated in what we say or write. And these expressions, animations or translations can, of course, always be questioned and negotiated on the *terra firma* of interaction. (Cooren, 2012, p. 12)

ST falls somewhere in between the two extremes. However, it leans rather toward the social constructivism of Luhmann's social systems theory, grasping social reality in a similar way as produced and reproduced in discourse (Giddens, 1984).

The Notion of Communication

Scholars across all three schools of CCO thinking are united in that their definitions of communication extend beyond the transmission view of communication (Axley, 1984): All emphasize the inherently dynamic, precarious, and ultimately indeterminate character of (verbal or non-verbal) communication (Cooren et al., 2011). According to Ashcraft et al. (2009), the minimum consensus among scholars within CCO thinking is that communication "entails the dynamic, interactive negotiation of meaning through symbol use" (p. 6). However, if we take a more fine-grained look at the three schools' respective notions of communication, we can see that each sheds light on different aspects of the communication process.

On the basis of the notion of *autopoiesis*, Luhmann (1995) emphasizes the self-reproducing character of communication. According to his view, communication occurs as a synthesis of three selections: On one hand, the selection of a specific piece of information and of an utterance that can be attributed to an individual human actor, which Luhmann designates as *alter*, and on the other hand, the selection of a particular way of understanding that can be attributed to another human actor, which Luhmann designates as *ego* (Luhmann, 1992). Most importantly, the meaning of communication is defined by the network of communications (Blaschke et al., 2012), not by the understanding of the individuals involved.

In contrast, scholars of the Montreal School object to the notion that communication necessarily requires the involvement of human actors and symbol use. Instead, these scholars propose to apply a notion of communication that is as wide as possible and that is sensitive for the communicative involvement of actors of all kinds, including non-human entities (e.g., Cooren, 2006). Proponents of the Montreal School comprehend communication as a transactional process that involves at least two roles: *A* and *B* interacting in relation to an object *X*. An organization or "meta-conversation" (Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004) emerges when *A* speaks on behalf of the collective *AB*. In addition to human actors, other (non-human) entities or "figures" (Cooren, 2010) may enter communicative relations. A second difference is that, while Luhmann's social systems theory places particular emphasis on the symbolic dimension of communication, and the Montreal School ascribes particular importance to the material dimension of communication processes (that is, to

their manifestations in texts, tools, or other artifacts), Giddens's ST features the symbolic as intersecting material and other dimensions of sociality. This also reflects the epistemological and ontological differences that were identified earlier, as well as the question of non-human agency that is discussed further below.

The Relation Between Organization and Communication

The strongest commonality among the three schools, however, is the presumed link between organization and communication. All three schools are fundamentally grounded in the assumption that the organization does not predate communication but emerges and perpetuates itself as a network of interlocking communication events (Blaschke et al., 2012; Taylor & Van Every, 2000) or "flows" (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). Furthermore, CCO scholars share the idea that organization and communication are mutually constituted in an *attributive relationship*: In other words, communication is performed "in the name of" or "on behalf of" the organization (e.g., Taylor & Cooren, 1997) and, through this attribution, ultimately evokes organization as a processual entity.

Despite these similarities, however, a closer look again reveals that the devil is in the details: The above dialogue clearly shows that the three schools differ markedly on the question of "what makes communication organizational" (Taylor & Cooren, 1997). For Luhmann, the organization only comes into being through the interconnection of decision-related communications over time; that is, when an earlier decision communication serves as a decision premise for further decision communications (Luhmann, 2000; Seidl, 2005). McPhee and Zaug (2000), in turn, open up this somewhat narrow focus on decisions by identifying four interrelated flows of communication that, collectively, give rise to organization. Broadening the notion of organizational communication even more, scholars of the Montreal School assume that speech acts of all kinds that are enacted on behalf of an organization (Cooren, 2004) have the capacity to form and maintain the collective endeavor (Taylor & Cooren, 1997).

Recent works in CCO thinking point out ways of achieving further integration among the three schools with respect to the link between organization and communication: For instance, Luhmann's social systems theory serves as a starting point for the conceptual argument by Christensen, Morsing, and Thyssen (2013) on the role of communication in corporate social responsibility (CSR); however, the authors go beyond these premises to embrace aspects of CCO as a broader theoretical endeavor. The authors argue that not only decisions but also other types of performative speech acts, such as promises

(or, in their vocabulary, "aspirational talk"), play a key role in the communicative constitution of organizations, not the least by projecting a future state that may pave the way for its own realization (see also Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012).

The Question of Human and Non-Human Agency

Finally, all three schools decenter the agency of human actors and acknowledge—each in its own way—the importance of non-human agency. The broadest notion of agency is reflected in Cooren's (2004) definition of agency as the "capability to 'make a difference', that is, to exercise some sort of power" (p. 389). Texts, tools, or other material objects are endowed with communicative agency as soon as they are acknowledged, mobilized, or foregrounded in the context of language use. Interestingly, the Montreal School's notion of non-human agency exhibits some striking parallels to Luhmann's (1995) social systems theory, as Schoeneborn (2011) argues. Although Luhmann (1992) would disagree with the idea that material objects can communicate, his theoretical works nevertheless underscore the importance and agency of non-human entities: The communication process itself forms autopoietic social systems by establishing a boundary and forming a self-referential network of communication events that produce or trigger further communication events; these, in turn, gain agency in their own right. Although material objects can be addressed and their meaning can be negotiated through communication, Luhmann would not go as far as to ascribe agency to these objects. Again, ST comes closer to Luhmann's social systems theory in this regard, in that it ascribes explanatory importance to the agency of established structures, practices, and institutions that enable and constrain the agency of humans (Giddens, 1984).

Concluding Remarks

Table 1 summarizes the key similarities and differences that we have identified between the three schools. This systematic comparison is intended to serve as a basis that will allow organizational communication scholars to reflect and elaborate on the further theoretical integration of the CCO perspective while acknowledging the heterogeneity of its origins, at the same time. Given the identified differences, the CCO perspective can be seen as evidence for one of its own theoretical premises, that is, that organizational collectives are fundamentally driven by dissensus (rather than consensus) as a driving force of their communicative perpetuation (see also Whelan, 2013). Nevertheless, we identified one powerful idea that unites all three schools of CCO thinking and we believe that it deserves further transversal exploration,

Table 1. Systematic Comparison of the Three Schools of CCO Thinking.

	Common ground	The Montreal School	Four-Flows Model	Theory of Social Systems
Epistemology and ontology	Assumption of a communicative constitution of reality; consequently, communication as primary mode of explanation	Relational; pragmatist transcendence of the distinction between idealism vs. realism; observer and objects of interest act upon each other	Posits duality of production and reproduction; observer relies on (institutionalized) knowledge and its viability in practice	Radical constructivist; observer constructs unique reality in a self-referential way; external world determines which reality constructions work (i.e., are viable) and which do not
Notion of communication	Communication as dynamic, interactive, indeterminate, and thus precarious process; rejection of transmission views of communication, which assume one-to-one transferability of information	Communication as transactional relation between human, as well as non-human, actors constitutes an agent–principal relation (speaking "on behalf of"); non-human actors can enter transactional relations when voiced in communication	Communication as active mutual orientation in symbolic interaction between actors, thus leading to the fused emergence of meaning, power, and its bases, that is, normative force, and socially/materially constituted systems and contexts	Communication as self-reproducing process of meaning negotiation, the synthesis of three selections: information, utterance, and understanding. What matters is not mutual understanding but the continuation of communication

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	Common ground	The Montreal School	Four-Flows Model	Theory of Social Systems
Organization–communication relation	Organization is not given a priori but emerges and is perpetuated as a network of interlocking communication events or processes; organization is evoked through communicative attributions of actorhood; organization as processual entity	Emphasis on the organizing properties of communication; all kinds of speech acts have the potential to give rise to organization. Organization both as transactional entity (an identifiable communicative collective) and imbricated process (a self-organizing network of communication)	Four communication flows collectively constitute organization: (a) reflexive self-structuring, (b) membership negotiation, (c) activity coordination, and (d) institutional positioning	Only decision-oriented communication has the capacity to let organization emerge. Organization as autopoietic and self-referential network of decision-oriented communication events; decisions link up to form sequences of decisions, where each decision serves as a premise for follow-up decisions
Non-human agency	Consensus on decentering the agency of human individuals and acknowledging—in different ways—the importance of non-human agency	Text, tools, or other material objects are endowed with agency (i.e., the capability to "make a difference") as soon as they are acknowledged, mobilized, or foregrounded in the context of language use	Acknowledges that technological and other objects enable and constrain organization, but also emphasizes the differences in the capabilities of human and non-human actors	Social systems are non-human actors in their own right (only communication can communicate); material objects, however, are part of an organization's environment and, therefore, can only "perturb" communication

namely, the idea that organizations do not predate communication but come into being through *attributive relations*, that is, via recurrent communicative processes that attribute actorhood to the organizational endeavor (Luhmann, 2000; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). In this regard, the CCO approach as a paradigmatic perspective (that also includes further important works beyond the three schools; see the overview by Ashcraft et al., 2009) has the potential to fruitfully contribute to some of the fundamental questions of organization theory, such as "what is an organization?" or "what is unique about organizations with respect to other social phenomena?" (see also King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010).

Afterword

by James R. Taylor (University of Montreal)

In a book published in 1979, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*, Gregory Bateson (1979) outlined what he considered to be the criteria that we need to explain thinking or the "phenomena of thought," as he put it (pp. 97-98). Here they are:

1. an aggregate of interacting parts or components,
2. interaction triggered by differences,
3. requiring collateral energy,
4. circular (or more complex) chains of determination,
5. the effects of difference to be regarded as transforms (i.e., coded versions) of events that preceded them,
6. the description and classification of those processes of transformation disclose a hierarchy of logical types immanent in the phenomena.

Bateson, an anthropologist, was careful not to limit thought to that which occurs in the individual human brain. It is not the materialization of thought in an individual intelligence that defines it but the pattern of communication it exemplifies.

In the words of the Chilean biologists, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1987), the authors of the theory of *autopoiesis*, what is critical to understanding scientific communication is to see it as "the coordinated behaviors mutually triggered among the members of a social unity" (p. 193). "Consciousness and mind," they wrote, "belong to the realm of social coupling" (1987, p. 234). For Maturana (1991), all science is sustained by "languaging," and culminates in "domains of explanation" (p. 30). Science is a social activity whose validation is that its contributions are authored by "standard observers," recognized as members of a community of scientists. Taylor

and Van Every (2000) drew this inference from Maturana's 1991 essay: The identity of the members of an organization, they wrote, is

> contingent on the existence of a cognitive domain within which the enacting gives rise to identities . . . Communication is not a strictly symbolic phenomenon, but also has a material basis in the enacting of what it reports without which the communication would not be authentic. (pp. 270-271)

That is not the usual way in which we have construed thinking in our civilization, thanks to René Descartes and to generations of psychologists who have followed him since. Thinking, for them, is supposed to be what goes on in the *head*. Artificial intelligence, when it emerged, only served to reinforce the same idea. However, there is an alternative: Thinking is what a community of shared practice is doing.

Consider the "three pillars" of the theory of the CCO in this light: They all identify with "domains of explanation" that will account for the phenomenon of human organization. Consider also the Hamburg conference: There were "interacting parts" (the participants), their interaction exposed differences, their interventions required energy, and the discussion was circular in its "chains of determination." There were "versions of preceding events" and "a hierarchy of logical types immanent in the phenomenon" they were focused on, organization.

For the Montreal School, to say that organization is "emergent" means not that it ever emerges as a transcendent entity, but rather that its existence is forever contingent on its construction in the recalcitrant material world that is the continuing preoccupation of its members (its "enactment"; Weick, 1979) and mediated by discursive interactions—the conversations and texts—that enable people to make sense of their experience, what the pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce called "thirdness" (Taylor & Van Every, 2011, in press).

McPhee and his associates choose a different point of entry into the dialogue. They ask instead what we need to explain if we are to account for organization: how members are mobilized, how the organization's purposes are constructed in dialogue, how membership is explained to start with, and how the organization, once identified as an actor, interacts with other actors in its larger society.

Those who trace their intellectual origin to the sociologist Luhmann have still another question in mind: How does the flow of acts of communication ("decisions") come to take on systemic properties, and then, how does the resulting system itself become an actor, in an environment, capable of entering the processes of interaction of its members as a constituent actor in its own right?

I have no idea how this dialogue will eventually work out. What is important is that it is now a collective engagement: It encompasses members of a scientific community that identifies itself as such and enforces on its thinking, as Maturana perceived, a discipline of dialogue, in that the members must frame their explanations intelligently, as the word "intelligent" is understood by their community. There is a real change—and a new challenge. Bob McPhee and I have been carrying on an on-and-off dialogue for the best part of two decades, not infrequently arguing over this or that point. I first wrote about Luhmann in a *Communication Theory* article (Taylor, 1995), but it is only lately that his work has taken on the salience it now has for me. What is happening now is different: the constitution of a *collective* mind at work. I look forward to what comes next.

The current theories do not quite match up. Each involves a different set of beliefs. Nobody is going to change their mind easily. As Peirce (1877/1955) wrote,

> We cling tenaciously, not merely to believing, but to believing just what we do believe . . . We think each one of our beliefs to be true, and, indeed, it is a mere tautology to say so . . . The irritation of doubt is the only immediate motive for the struggle to attain belief . . . the sole object of inquiry is the settlement of belief. (pp. 10-11)

However,

> The mere putting of a proposition into the interrogative form does not stimulate the mind to any struggle to attain belief . . . Unless we make ourselves hermits, we shall necessarily influence each other's opinions; so the problem becomes how to fix belief, not in the individual merely, but in the community. (p. 13)

The Hamburg conference was a community at work.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This forum benefitted from support by the scientific network "Organization as Communication" (www.orgcom.org), funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG; Grant BL 1149/1-1).

References

Ashcraft, K. L., Kuhn, T. R., & Cooren, F. (2009). Constitutional amendments: "Materializing" organizational communication. *Academy of Management Annals*, *3*, 1-64.

Axley, S. (1984). Managerial communication in terms of the conduit metaphor. *Academy of Management Review*, *9*, 428-437.

Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. New York, NY: Bantam Press.

Besio, C., & Pronzini, A. (2010). Inside organizations and out: Methodological tenets for empirical research Inspired by systems theory. *Qualitative Social Research*, *11*(3), 1-22.

Bisel, R. S. (2010). A communicative ontology of organization? A description, history, and critique of CCO theories for organization science. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *24*, 124-131.

Blaschke, S., Schoeneborn, D., & Seidl, D. (2012). Organizations as networks of communication episodes: Turning the network perspective inside out. *Organization Studies*, *33*, 879-906.

Brummans, B., Cooren, F., Robichaud, D., & Taylor, J. R. (2014). Approaches in research on the communicative constitution of organizations. In L. L. Putnam & D. Mumby (Eds.), *SAGE handbook of organizational communication* (3rd ed., pp. 173-194). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bühler, K. (1934). *Sprachtheorie: Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache* [The theory of language: The representational function of language]. Jena, Germany: Fischer.

Canary, H. (2010). Structurating activity theory: An integrative approach to policy knowledge. *Communication Theory*, *20*, 21-49.

Canary, H., & McPhee, R. (2009). The mediation of policy knowledge: An interpretive analysis of intersecting activity systems. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *23*, 147-187.

Christensen, L. T., Morsing, M., & Thyssen, O. (2013). CSR as aspirational talk. *Organization*, *20*, 372-393.

Cooren, F. (2004). Textual agency: How texts do things in organizational settings. *Organization*, *11*, 373-394.

Cooren, F. (2006). The organizational world as a plenum of agencies. In F. Cooren, J. R. Taylor, & E. J. Van Every (Eds.), *Communication as organizing: Empirical and theoretical explorations in the dynamic of text and conversations* (pp. 81-100). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Cooren, F. (2010). *Action and agency in dialogue: Passion, incarnation and ventriloquism*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.

Cooren, F. (2012). Communication theory at the center: Ventriloquism and the communicative constitution of reality. *Journal of Communication*, *62*, 1-20.

Cooren, F., Kuhn, T. R., Cornelissen, J. P., & Clark, T. (2011). Communication, organizing and organization: An overview and introduction to the special issue. *Organization Studies*, *32*(9), 1-22.

Cooren, F., Taylor, J. R., & Van Every, E. J. (Eds.). (2006). *Communication as organizing: Empirical and theoretical explorations in the dynamic of text and conversations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Craig, R. T. (1999). Communication theory as a field. *Communication Theory*, *9*, 119-161.

Deetz, S. (2005). Critical theory. In S. K. May & D. K. Mumby (Eds.), *Engaging organizational communication theory and research: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 85-112). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Drepper, T. (2005). Organization and society—On the desideratum of a society theory of organizations in the work of Niklas Luhmann. In D. Seidl & K. H. Becker (Eds.), *Niklas Luhmann and organization studies* (pp. 171-190). Copenhagen, Denmark: Copenhagen Business School Press.

Garfinkel, H. (2002). *Ethnomethodology's program: Working out Durkheim's aphorism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Haack, P., Schoeneborn, D., & Wickert, C. (2012). Talking the talk, moral entrapment, creeping commitment? Exploring narrative dynamics in corporate responsibility standardization. *Organization Studies*, *33*, 813-845.

Heracleous, L., & Hendry, J. (2000). Discourse and the study of organization: Towards a structurational perspective. *Human Relations*, *53*, 1251-1286.

Iverson, J., & McPhee, R. D. (2008). Communicating knowing through communities of practice: Exploring internal communicative processes and differences among CoPs. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *36*, 176-200.

King, B. G., Felin, T., & Whetten, D. A. (2010). Finding the organization in organizational theory: A meta-theory of the organization as a social actor. *Organization Science*, *21*, 290-305.

Koschmann, M., Bisel, R., Botero, I., Lin, C., Olufowote, J., Perriton, L., . . .Wieland, S. (2012). An eye for an I: Thoughts about Management Communication Quarterly from the next generation. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *26*, 656-681.

Kuhn, T. (2012). Negotiating the micro–macro divide: Thought leadership from organizational communication for theorizing organization. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *26*, 543-584.

Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. London, England: Oxford University Press.

Latour, B. (2013). *An inquiry into modes of existence: An anthropology of the moderns*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Luhmann, N. (1986). The autopoiesis of social systems. In F. Geyer & J. van der Zouwen (Eds.), *Sociocybernetic paradoxes: Observation, control and evolution of self-steering systems* (pp. 171-192). London, England: Sage.

Luhmann, N. (1992). What is communication? *Communication Theory*, *2*, 251-259.

Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social systems*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Luhmann, N. (2000). *Organisation und Entscheidung* [Organization and decision]. Opladen, Germany: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Luhmann, N. (2002). How can the mind participate in communication? In N. Luhmann (Ed.), *Theories of distinction: Redescribing the descriptions of modernity* (pp. 169-184). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Luhmann, N. (2003). Organization. In T. Bakken & T. Hernes (Eds.), *Autopoietic organization theory: Drawing on Niklas Luhmann's social systems perspective* (pp. 31-52). Oslo, Norway: Copenhagen Business School Press.

Luhmann, N. (2005). The paradox of decision making. In D. Seidl & K. H. Becker (Eds.), *Niklas Luhmann and organization studies* (pp. 85-106). Copenhagen, Denmark: Copenhagen Business School Press.

Luhmann, N. (2009). *Soziologische Aufklärung 5: Konstruktivistische Perspektiven* [Sociological enlightenment 5: Constructivist perspectives]. Wiesbaden, Germany: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Luhmann, N. (2012). *Theory of society* (Vol. I). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Maturana, H. R. (1991). Science in daily life: The ontology of scientific explanations. In F. Steier (Ed.), *Research and reflexivity: Self-reflexivity as social process* (pp. 30-52). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1987). *The tree of knowledge*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.

McPhee, R. D. (1988). Vertical communication chains toward an integrated approach. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *1*, 455-493.

McPhee, R. D. (1998). Giddens' conception of personal relationships and its relevance to communication theory. In R. Conville & E. Rogers (Eds.), *The meaning of "relationship" in interpersonal communication* (pp. 83-106). Westport, CT: Praeger.

McPhee, R. D., & Canary, H. (2013, July 4-6). *Distanciation and organizational constitution*. Paper presented at the European Group of Organizational Studies Colloquium (EGOS), Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

McPhee, R. D., & Iverson, J. (2009). Agents of constitution in the communidad: Constitutive processes of communication in organizations. In L. L. Putnam & A. M. Nicotera (Eds.), *The communicative constitution of organization: Centering organizational communication* (pp. 49-88). Mahwah, NJ: Routledge.

McPhee, R. D., & Iverson, J. (2011). Materiality, structuration, and communication. In T. Kuhn (Ed.), *Matters of communication: Political, cultural, and technological challenges to communication theorizing* (pp. 101-122). New York, NY: Hampton Press.

McPhee, R. D., & Zaug, P. (2000). The communicative constitution of organizations: A framework for explanation. *Electronic Journal of Communication*, *10*(1-2). Retrieved from http://www.cios.org/EJCPUBLIC/010/1/01017.html

McPhee, R. D., & Zaug, P. (2001). Organizational theory, organizational communication, organizational knowledge, and problematic integration. *Journal of Communication*, *51*, 574-591.

Monge, P. R., & Contractor, N. S. (2003). *Theories of communication networks*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Peirce, C. S. (1955). *Philosophical writings of Peirce* (J. Buchler, Ed.). New York, NY: Dover. (Original work published 1877)

Perrow, C. (1967). A framework for the comparative analysis of organizations. *American Sociological Review*, *32*, 194-208.

Putnam, L. L., & Nicotera, A. M. (Eds.). (2009). *Building theories of organization: The constitutive role of communication*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Putnam, L. L., & Pacanowsky, M. (Eds.). (1983). *Communication and organizations: An interpretive approach*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Putnam, L. L., Phillips, N., & Chapman, P. (1996). Metaphors of communication and organizations. In S. R. Clegg & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of organization studies* (pp. 375-408). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Robichaud, D., Giroux, H., & Taylor, J. R. (2004). The metaconversation: The recursive property of language as a key to organizing. *Academy of Management Review*, *29*, 617-634.

Schoeneborn, D. (2011). Organization as communication: A Luhmannian perspective. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *25*, 663-689.

Searle, J. R. (1979). *Expression and meaning: Studies in the theory of speech acts*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, J. R. (1995). *The construction of social reality*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Seidl, D. (2005). *Organisational identity and self-transformation*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

Seidl, D., & Becker, K. H. (2005). *Niklas Luhmann and organization studies*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Copenhagen Business School Press.

Seidl, D., & Becker, K. H. (2006). Organizations as distinction generating and processing systems: Niklas Luhmann's contribution to organization studies. *Organization*, *13*, 9-35.

Seidl, D., & Mormann, H. (in press). Niklas Luhmann as organization theorist. In P. Adler, P. du Gay, G. Morgan, & M. Reed (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of sociology, social theory and organization studies: Contemporary currents*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Sillince, J. A. A. (2010). Can CCO theory tell us how organizing is distinct from markets, networking, belonging to a community, or supporting a social movement? *Management Communication Quarterly*, *24*, 132-138.

Taylor, J. R. (1995). Shifting from a heteronomous to an autonomous worldview of organizational communication: Communication theory on the cusp. *Communication Theory*, *5*, 1-35.

Taylor, J. R., & Cooren, F. (1997). What makes communication "organizational"? How the many voices of a collectivity become the one voice of an organization. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *27*, 409-438.

Taylor, J. R., & Van Every, E. J. (2000). *The emergent organization: Communication as its site and surface*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Taylor, J. R., & Van Every, E. J. (2011). *The situated organization: Case studies in the pragmatics of communication research*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Taylor, J. R., & Van Every, E. J. (in press). *When organization fails: Why authority matters*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Watzlawick, P. (Ed.). (1984). *The invented reality: How do we know what we believe we know? Contributions to constructivism*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

Weick, K. E. (1979). *The social psychology of organizing*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Whelan, G. (2013). Corporate constructed and dissent enabling public spheres: Differentiating dissensual from consensual corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *115*, 755-769.

Whitehead, A. N. (1920). *Concept of nature*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Whitehead, A. N. (1929). *Process and reality: An essay in cosmology*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Author Biographies

Dennis Schoeneborn (Dr. rer. pol., Bauhaus University Weimar, Germany) is associate professor of organization, communication, and corporate social responsibility at Copenhagen Business School, Denmark. His current research focuses on the communicative constitution of rudimentary and partial organizations.

Steffen Blaschke (Dr. rer. pol., University of Marburg, Germany) is associate professor of organizational communication at Copenhagen Business School, Denmark. His current research concerns measures and methods for structures and dynamics of organizational communication.

François Cooren (PhD, Université de Montréal, Canada) is professor and chair of the Department of Communication at the Université de Montréal, Canada. His research focuses on the organizing property of communication and the pragmatics of language.

Robert D. McPhee (PhD, Michigan State University, United States) is professor in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. His research interests included organizational hierarchies, organizational knowledge, the communicative constitution of organizations, and structuration theory.

David Seidl (PhD, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom) is full professor of organization and management at the Department of Business Administration at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, and research associate at the Centre for Business Studies at Cambridge University, United Kingdom. His current research focuses on the dynamics of standardization, the practices of strategy, and organizational consulting.

James R. Taylor (PhD, University of Pennsylvania, United States) is emeritus professor of communication at the Université de Montréal, Canada. He is currently engaged in the study of authority, its origins, and its dynamics. His new book, *When Organizations Fail: Why Authority Matters* (co-authored by Elizabeth Van Every), will be published later this year.